

METHOD AND SYSTEM FOR TRACKING ITEMS
USING A DISTRIBUTED INFRASTRUCTURE

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates generally to methods and systems for tracking one or more items and, more particularly, to methods and systems for tracking an item by detecting an item-identification associated with the item using a distributed detection infrastructure.

BACKGROUND

Various systems have been developed and implemented for tracking such diverse items as parcels, credit cards, personal belongings, library materials, livestock, automobiles, and even people. For example, many toll roads employ a toll-collection system in which a wireless device is installed in an automobile. The wireless device stores either a remaining balance of pre-paid toll money in an account of the owner of the automobile or simply the account number of the automobile owner's pre-paid toll account. Whenever the automobile is driven past an automated toll-collection booth on a toll-road employing such a system, this toll-collection system automatically deducts the amount of toll charged at that automated toll-collection booth either from the remaining balance stored in the wireless device in the automobile or from a remotely stored ledger-balance maintained for the account identified by the account number stored in the wireless device. In either case, the account associated with the automobile is automatically updated as the automobile passes the toll-collection booth. Thus, this

system simply maintains a current balance for the pre-paid toll account of each automobile owner having a wireless device for the system. The system does not maintain a record of the location of each toll collection for the automobile and thus does not permit automobiles to be tracked.

5 Another example of a prior system for tracking items (in particular, parcels) is the parcel-tracking system of Federal Express®. Each parcel delivered by Federal Express® is labeled with a parcel number. Federal Express® maintains a database of the parcel numbers for parcels shipped by Federal Express®, together with status and/or delivery information relating to that parcel. When a parcel is deposited with Federal Express®, an
10 entry is added to the Federal Express® tracking database containing at least the parcel number of that parcel and an indication that the parcel has not yet been delivered. When the parcel is eventually delivered, the entry for that parcel in the Federal Express® tracking database is updated to include information about the delivery (e.g., the fact that the parcel was delivered, the time and date of delivery, the individual who signed for the
15 parcel, *etc.*). In addition, at various points during the transportation of the parcel to the delivery location, information may be added to the Federal Express® tracking database regarding the delivery status of the parcel. However, Federal Express® agents manually enter this information into the Federal Express® tracking database solely on the basis of a unique Federal Express® tracking number printed on a Federal Express® Airbill used to
20 provide addressing information to Federal Express®. Consequently, this system is useful only for tracking parcels of a single entity, namely Federal Express®. Further, even for Federal Express® parcels, the tracking capabilities of this system are quite limited. For example, the Federal Express® system does not track movement of a Federal Express®

parcel either before the parcel is deposited with Federal Express® or after the parcel is delivered to its final destination.

In addition to the deficiencies in tracking capabilities exemplified by the above-described “tracking” systems, each of the various known systems for “tracking” a discrete class of items (e.g., automobiles, parcels, *etc.*) requires its own infrastructure, often including proprietary components and labor forces that are not, and generally cannot be, shared by other systems. As a result, each system requires a substantial investment in development time, and costs for infrastructure installation, operation, maintenance, and upgrades.

10 BRIEF SUMMARY

The methods and systems of the present invention may be used to track items in a way that overcomes the foregoing drawbacks of prior tracking systems and methods. For example, the present invention contemplates, among others, systems which permit separate tracking of various sets of items using the same infrastructure for tracking all such sets of items, continuous tracking of items, and actual tracking of the geographical location of items.

The present invention may be implemented as a method of tracking an item. More particularly, an item may be provided with an identifier for specifying an item-identification of the item and a tracking-station-identification of a tracking station related to the item. The item-identification of the item and the tracking-station-identification may then be obtained from the identifier of the item, via a gate having a gate-identification, and the item-identification of the item and the gate-identification of the

gate may then be communicated, via a computer network, to the tracking station identified by the tracking-station-identification.

The item-identification and the tracking-station-identification may be transmitted from the identifier of the item to the gate. Alternatively, the identifier of the item may 5 comprise a passive source for providing the item-identification and the tracking-station-identification, and the item-identification and the tracking-station-identification may be detected from the passive source.

The item-identification of the item may be uniquely associated with the item and may comprise an Internet Protocol address for the item. Likewise, the gate-identification 10 of the gate may be uniquely associated with the gate and may comprise an Internet Protocol address for the gate, and the tracking-station identification of the tracking station may be uniquely associated with the tracking station, comprising, for example, an Internet Protocol address for the tracking station.

In one embodiment, a plurality of geographically distributed gates may be 15 provided. Whenever an item approaches any one of the gates, the item-identification of the item and the tracking-station-identification may be obtained from the identifier of the item, via the approached gate. Preferably, the item is related to a particular one of a plurality of tracking stations, and the item-identification obtained from the item is communicated, via the approached gate, to the particular tracking station related to the 20 item.

A plurality of items may each have a corresponding item-identification and be provided with a respective identifier for specifying the corresponding item-identification of that item. The item-identification of each item approaching a gate may be obtained,

via the gate, and the obtained item-identification and a gate-identification of the gate may be communicated to a tracking station related to the item.

Also in accordance with the invention, items may be tracked by a system comprising a tracking station associated with the item, an identifier for specifying an item-identification of the item and a tracking-station-identification of the tracking station, and a gate coupled with the tracking station for obtaining the item-identification of the item and the tracking-station-identification of the tracking station and communicating the obtained item-identification and a gate-identification of the gate to the tracking station identified by the tracking-station-identification.

10 BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWING

FIG. 1 is a block-diagram illustrating one exemplary embodiment of a computer-based tracking system in accordance with the present invention; and

FIG. 2 is a high-level flowchart illustrating an exemplary operational sequence for tracking items in accordance with the present invention.

15 DETAILED DESCRIPTION

FIG. 1 illustrates, in block-diagram form, one exemplary embodiment of a system 10 for tracking items in accordance with the present invention. As shown, the tracking system 10 includes a network 12, which may include all or a part of the Internet and/or all or a part of any other suitable computer network. Regardless of the nature and breadth of the network 12, at least one tracking station 14 is coupled with the network 12. The tracking station 14 has a tracking-station-identification 16 that identifies or is otherwise

associated with the tracking station 14, preferably uniquely. For example, the tracking-station-identification 16 can comprise an Internet Protocol address for the tracking station

14. Optionally, as indicated by the use of phantom lines in FIG. 1, one or more additional tracking stations, such as the tracking station 18 with tracking-station-identification 20, may also be coupled with the network 12.

The system 10 also includes at least one gate 22 having a gate-identification 24 associated therewith. The gate-identification 24 can comprise an Internet Protocol address for the gate 22 or any other identification associated, preferably uniquely, with

the gate 22. In other words, in embodiments having a plurality of gates, such as gate 28

10 having gate-identification 30 and gate 36 having gate-identification 38 (shown in phantom lines in **FIG. 1**), each gate 22, 28, and 36 has a respective gate-identification 24, 30, 38 that preferably, but not necessarily, differs from the gate-identification of each other gate. Several gates located near one another could, if desired, have identical gate-identifications. However, providing each gate with a unique gate-identification may facilitate maintenance of the system 10 in that an administrator of the system 10 may be able to identify a malfunctioning gate, for example, by means of the unique gate-identification of that gate. Further, until a malfunctioning gate is repaired, another gate with a different unique gate-identification may be able to be used as a temporary substitute for the malfunctioning gate. Each gate 22, 28, 36 also includes a respective detector 26, 34, 40 as explained in more detail below.

15

20

In accordance with the present invention, the system 10 may be used to track a plurality of items of any type whatsoever (e.g., parcels, automobiles, livestock, fruit and other agricultural products, people, credit cards, personal belongings, library materials,

season passes, commuter passes, *etc.*). For purposes of this description, one such item 42 is shown symbolically in **FIG. 1**. The item 42 is provided with an identifier 44 for specifying an item-identification 46 of the item 42 and a tracking-station-identification 48 of a tracking station related to the item 42. By way of illustration, the tracking station 14 5 may be “related to” the item 42. For example, the tracking station 14 can comprise a computer operated by or for the owner of the item 42 or any other entity or individual user interested in tracking the item 42. In such a case, the tracking-station-identification 48 of the identifier 44 of the item 42 would correspond to the tracking-station-identification 10 16 of the tracking station 14 related to the item 42. The item-identification 46 may comprise an Internet Protocol address for the item 42 or any other identification associated, preferably uniquely, with the item 42.

Optionally, other information 50 that may be used or even required by the system 10 may also be specified by or included in the identifier 44 in addition to the item-identification 46 and the tracking-station-identification 48, and still other information 15 may be provided to a tracking station by a gate in addition to or instead of the other information 50. For example, such other information may be specifically related to a particular type of item being tracked by the system 10.

By way of illustration only, other information relating to a credit card may include a dollar amount of a transaction involving the credit card at a gate or a graphic image of 20 the signature of the owner of the credit card. A graphic image of an owner’s signature can also be provided for a passport being tracked by the system 10. If the system 10 is used to track people, a person’s blood-type can be provided so that, for example, if the person is injured in an accident, the person’s blood-type can be readily determined via the

system 10 in order to expedite providing the injured person with a blood transfusion. If the system 10 employs a temporarily allocated IP address as an item-identification, such that the item-identification has a limited lifetime, the expiration date of the item-identification can be provided as optional “other” information. Similarly, if an identifier 5 for a particular item is valid only in a particular geographical region, the identifier may provide an indication of that particular geographical region so that gates outside the geographical region that happen to detect information from the identifier of that item can disregard such information.

Further, when the item 42 approaches the gate 22, and the gate 22 detects the 10 item-identification 46 from the identifier 44 of the item 42, the gate 22 can record a time of detection of the item-identification 46 and communicate that time of detection to the tracking station 14 via the network 12.

In one embodiment, the identifier 44 of the item 42 includes a transmitter 52 for transmitting the item-identification 46 of the item 42 and the tracking-station- 15 identification 48 from the identifier 44 of the item 42 to the gate 22. Such a transmitter 52 may employ infrared, radio-frequency (RF), or other wireless communication, or may employ a wire-based data-transmission system, as desired. In such an embodiment, the detector 26 of the gate 22 may comprise a receiver for receiving information from the transmitter 52 of the identifier 44. Alternatively, the identifier 44 can comprise a passive 20 source for providing the item-identification 46 of the item 42, and the item-identification 46 can be detected from the passive source (*i.e.*, from the identifier 44) by the detector 26 of the gate 22. By way of example but not limitation, a passive source can include a bar-code or other optically or visually readable marking or label, or a proximity-sensed or

other detectable source, whether the means of detection is mechanical, electrical, electronic, magnetic, electromagnetic, or electromechanical, *etc.* As will be evident to those of ordinary skill in the art, the particular manner in which information is obtained from the identifier 44, whether via transmitter or passive source, forms no part of the 5 present invention, and any suitable technique can be used to obtain the information in accordance with the principles of the present invention.

The gate-identification 24 of the gate 22 may comprise an Internet Protocol address or other, preferably unique, identification of the gate 22, or may alternatively comprise a numerical value from which the geographical location of the gate may be 10 determined, such as by the tracking station 14. Alternatively, the gate 22 may provide a tracking station 14 with information representing the geographical position of the gate 22, such that when an item 42 is detected by the gate 22, the geographical position of the item 42 at that time can be determined by the tracking station 14 that receives the item-identification 46 for the item 42 from the gate 22.

15 The flowchart of **FIG. 2** illustrates one exemplary sequence of acts that may be performed in connection with a method of tracking items in accordance with the present invention. To provide a point of reference, the process illustrated by the flowchart of **FIG. 2** is described in relation to the system 10 of **FIG. 1**. Initially, the item 42 approaches the gate 22 (block 60), and the gate 22 obtains the item-identification 46 and 20 the tracking-station-identification 48 (and any other information 50 optionally provided) from the identifier 44 of the item 42 (block 62). The gate 22 then communicates the item-identification 46 of the item 42 and, optionally, other information (which may include, but is not limited to, some or all of the other information 50 received from the

identifier 44), and the gate-identification 24 of the gate 22, to the tracking station identified by the tracking-station-identification 48 received from the identifier 44 of the item 42. By way of example, if the item 42 is related to the tracking station 14 having tracking-station-identification 16, then the tracking-station-identification 48 obtained from the identifier 44 will match the tracking-station-identification 16 of the tracking station 14. The tracking station 14 then receives the item-identification 46, the gate-identification 24 and any other information optionally provided in the identifier 44 of the item 42 or optionally provided by the gate 22 (block 66).

10 Optionally, as illustrated by the block 68 shown in phantom lines in **FIG. 2**, the tracking station 14 may then process the item-identification 46, the gate-identification 24 and any other information 50 obtained from the identifier 44 of the item 42 or other information provided by the gate 22. For example, such processing can include conveying position information for the item 42 to a user interested in tracking the item 42. As noted above, such position information can be determined, for example, based on 15 the gate-identification 24 of the gate 22 that communicated the item-identification 46 of the item 42 to the tracking station 14. Alternatively, the gate 22 may comprise a positioning system (e.g., a global positioning system or GPS), and the position information can be obtained from the positioning system of the gate 22.

20 As shown in **FIG. 1**, the system 10 can include a plurality of geographically distributed gates 22, 28, 36, such that whenever the item 42 approaches any one of the gates, 22, 28 or 36, the item-identification 46 and a tracking-station-identification 48 may be obtained from the identifier 44 of the item 42 by that gate 22, 28, or 36 and communicated to the particular tracking station 14 related to the item 42, as specified by

the tracking-station-identification 48 also obtained by the gate 22 approached by the item 42. Thus, even when the system 10 includes a plurality of tracking stations (such as tracking stations 14 and 18), the item-identification 46 and the gate-identification 24 are communicated, preferably exclusively, to the particular one (or optionally more than one) 5 of those tracking stations 14 or 18 related to the item 42, as specified by the tracking-station-identification 48 of the identifier 44 of the item 42. As an example, an item identifier for a passport of a person with dual-citizenship may provide an identification of a tracking station in each country where that person has citizenship. Thus, when the person's passport is detected by a gate, information about that detection may be provided 10 to each of two or more tracking stations related to the person's passport.

As will be readily appreciated by those of ordinary skill in the art, the identifier 44 can take many forms. For example, the identifier can comprise a tag affixed to the item 42, such that the various pieces of information (*i.e.* the item-identification 46, the tracking-station-identification 48, and any other information 50) can be obtained from the 15 identifier 44 by a gate 22 by any suitable technique (*e.g.* optical scanning, magnetic-strip reading, proximity-sensing, radio or other transmission, *etc.*). In any case, the identifier 44 and the detector 26 of the gate 22 must employ compatible technology such that the information in the identifier 44 can be obtained by the detector 26 of the gate 22. The skilled artisan will recognize, as noted above, that the present invention is not limited to 20 any particular manner of the information being transferred from the identifier 44 to the gate 22. Similarly, while the gate 22 communicates with the tracking station 16 via the Internet or other network 12 in the illustrated system 10 of **FIG. 1**, this communication

may also take place by any other suitable means in addition to or instead of via the network 12 in accordance with the present invention.

The foregoing description is for the purpose of teaching those skilled in the art the best mode of carrying out the invention and is intended to be illustrative only. Numerous 5 modifications and alternative embodiments of the invention will be apparent to those skilled in the art in view of this description, and the disclosed embodiments may be varied substantially without departing from the spirit of the invention. Accordingly, the exclusive use of all modifications within the scope of the appended claims is reserved.